

## **Reinvent Yourself in Head Start**

**Stefany Robinson-Thorpe**

Good afternoon. My name is Stefany Robinson-Thorpe and I'm representing the Delaware County Intermediate Unit Head Start program in Delaware County, Pennsylvania, which is located right outside of Philadelphia. Today I wanted to talk a little bit about my journey through Head Start, where I began. I actually didn't begin as a Head Start student.

I was raised by my grandmother, Virginia Pearson, who was the nurse for Head Start on the island of Guam. So, quite frequently, she would drag me along behind her to the different programs, and I would get an opportunity to see her interact with staff, and with parents, and with the students; not really understanding, at that point in my life, how important what one person was doing – what an impact that was going to have on people's lives for many years to come.

And then, most recently, with my own journey through Head Start, having the opportunity to enroll my youngest son, Grant, in the program. It gave me an opportunity to reassess my – reassess my vision of what it was that I wanted to do while my son was in the care of his teachers. Head Start quickly pulled me in to participate in parent committee, to volunteer on Policy Council. And what I found was that, in reinventing myself at this point, I got back the voice that I thought that I had lost.

In meeting the different people – the director, Renee Bell; the associate director, Antoinette Gordee; Lisa Carloni – I found that when I spoke, people listened and they actually respected what it was that I had to say; that they actually believed in what I had to say; and that they knew that my love for my child extended beyond the walls of my own home, that it extended out into Head Start, into the different centers that we have, into the community.

Our program serves over 1,100 families – a very diverse collection of unique individuals that come from all parts of the world. We have a very large Hispanic population. We have a very large population that has migrated from Africa. And so, we continually strive to – to accommodate the needs and make sure that we are culturally aware, and that we are sensitive to the needs of all the different families in the program.

I've had an opportunity to make friendships with people that I know will last for a lifetime. Head Start has been instrumental in helping my child to develop at a pace that he's been comfortable with. My teachers understand him, and they understand that when he has a bad day, that it's just one day and that it's not his whole life, and that we're going to start again tomorrow.

And just to be patient. I've probably learned patience more so than anything from the teachers. And I've learned from my child. And I think that it's important: for him to see me involved when I walk him into the classroom, when I pick him up at school; that he knows that his mother or his father or his siblings have left him in a place that is safe and secure; and that he's there to learn; and that he has his friends; and that... I can see the love that the teachers have for the children.

And I can honestly say that there's not any place right now that I think would be a better place for my son to be, and I know, without a doubt, that there is no place else in the world that I would rather be right now than connected with Head Start. And even when my time with Policy Council is over, and parent committees, and my son goes on to be a man, I know that I'll always be connected – that I have Head Start running through my veins. And that is the most important thing to me.